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REVIEW ARTICLE

**ROLE OF HISTORY IN THE NOVELS OF SALMAN
RUSHDIE**

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Role of History in the Novels of Salman Rushdie

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Rushdie has made his aesthetic predilections very clear when he requests the readers not to expect from writers like him, that his novels create 'typical' or 'representative' fictions which are invariably dead books. His books attempt radical reformulation of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the 'novel' seems to insist upon: to see the world a new.

Rushdie's history should not be considered as an oracle of truth, a reliable source of facts and statistical accuracy. History should be a guide to other alternative stories, seen as commingling and colliding into a meaningful whole, as the only key to our personal truths. His books cannot be read as the end-all truth about Indian post-colonial history. They combine personal and national identity, factual past and remembered past, individuality and its war against communal insignificance.

Midnight's Children is highly innovative novel that was the fore-runner of 'a new genre of writing from India, other Asian countries and Africa, combining magic realism of Latin American novels with political comment, satire, and dissertations on contemporary history in the context of de-colonisation'. In an interview given to Gordon Wise he himself claims that his novels '*Midnight's Children* and *Shame* are novels of historical themes.'

Through an encapsulation of the experiences of three generations of the Sinai family, the narrative of *Midnight's Children* moves through three different phases of the country- pre-Independence, Partition and the post-Independence. Dr. Aziz's quick rejection of the Rowlan Act, the strike called by Gandhi on April 7th 1919, the premonition of the historical Jallianwallah Bagh event linked to the etching of Dr. Aziz's nose entices the reader into 'a willing suspension or disbelief.' True momentous events like the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi are reported alive by the author. The latter part of the novel deals with tumultuous events of 1971 War, and the creation of Bangladesh, and the controversial period of Mrs. Gandhi's rule. Rushdie virtually erases the thin line between documentary realism, journalistic analysis, and fable. In this regard Tariq Ali has pointed out, *Midnight's Children* is:

A portrayal not simply of wicked individuals, but of the collective frenzy of a desperately frightened ruling class. And in this aspect it is 'unique in Indo-English literature'. (Ali, 89)

He has transformed his novel *Midnight's Children* into a political history, giving it a comic strain. With political history as the starting point, it is an epic sweep extending in time and space covering six decades of Indian sub-continent history. From the pre-Independence Jallianwallah Bagh incident, the novel covers the period till Saleem's birth on 15 August 1947, is extended up to the end of Indo-Pak war in September 1963. The book leaves us to the incidents and events up to the end of Emergency in March 1977. These sixty-three years of narrative spanning Mahatma Gandhi's return from South Africa in 1915 till 1977 after the end of Indra Gandhi's Emergency focuses the moment of Indian Independence in 1947 as a chronological and thematic center point. He adopts variant modes of portrayal in the presentation of these historical facts that cover a vast span.

Shame, the next novel, also represents Indo-Pak war as *Midnight's Children* does but from the other side of the Indian border. It re-creates that events leading to the civil strife in Pakistan. Set in the fictional country of Peccavistan, it is a satirical history of Pakistan and recalls historical events through the prism of a family drama involving a military dictator and his mentally retarded, ultimately murderous daughter. *Shame* offers a thinly veiled critique of Pakistan's small ruling class of power brokers who, following the end of the Raj, exploit the colonizer's consolidated power. For reviving the forbidden history of the late 1970's *Shame* was banned in Pakistan, although the narrator has disingenuously argued that he is telling only a fairy-tale.

In the slain storyline, the Shameful aspects of the social, political and cultural scene are crystallized in the lives and activities of its two prominent leaders, representing civilian and military authority in the country and its coercive political structure. One is a famous warrior, General Raza Hyder caricatured on General Mohammed Zia ul-Haque, who ultimately becomes president-dictator of his country; the other is

a rich landlord and playboy, Iskander Harappa, a fictional image of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who enjoys a successfully demagogic reign as Prime Minister until he is overthrown by Raza Hyder and eventually hanged (when already a corpse) after a rigged trial for the murder of a relative.

If *shame* resembles an Elizabethan revenge play or a Gothic novel, Rushdie, appearing throughout the novel as the author-narrator, tells his readers quite clearly that the events of his story are only 'at a slight angle to reality.' In fact, he leaves no doubt that *Shame* is an attempt to recreate the history of the state of Pakistan in the imaginative mode.

The genius of the author lies in not only tracing histories but in re-searching details as to who the historians are, what medium they use, and the language used. To keep the element of mystery and fantasy alive he insists on the anonymity of the palimpsest-country of his story. The process of representing and re-imagining Indian Body Politics that Rushdie starts in *Midnight's Children* continues in *The Moor's Last Sigh* through *Shame*.

The Moor's Last Sigh brings *Midnight's Children's* politics up to date. While re-affirming the Nehruvian idea of India as secular democracy, it moves past the crisis of, governance of the 1975-77 Emergency and the ideological crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. It is mainly through the narrator, Moraes, and his mother, Aurora, that these ideas are inscribed and negotiated. Moraes ages at a double speed, his growth a metaphor for the burgeoning post-Independence India specifically Bombay both in terms of population and development: 'Like the city itself,' he says, 'I expanded without time for proper planning.' (*The Moor's Last Sigh* 161-162)

The Moor's Last Sigh is a novel about modern India. Its hero is Moraes Zogoiby of Bombay, nicknamed by his mother the Moor: But the famous sigh to which the title refers was breathed six centuries ago, in 1492, when Muhammad XI, last Sultan of Andalusia, bade farewell to his kingdom, bringing to an end Arab-Islamic dominance in Iberia. Fourteen ninety-two was the year, also, when the Jews of Spain were offered the choice of baptism or expulsion: and when Columbus, financed by the royal conquerors of the Moor, Ferdinand and Isabella, sailed forth to discover a new route to the East.

In fact, Rushdie is far from being a programmatic postmodernist. For instance, he is disinclined to treat the historical record as just one story among many. We see this in his treatment of the two histories out of which Moraes' story grows: of the Moors in Spain; and of the Jews in India. In the case of the Moors and of Muhammad Boabdil in particular, Rushdie does not deviate from the historical record, which is probably most familiar to Westerners from Washington Irving's nostalgic sketches in *The Alhambra*. As for the Jewish communities in India, their origins are ancient and will

probably never be known with certainty. However, they have preserved certain legends of the origin, and to these legends Rushdie adheres without embroidering, save for one superadded fiction: that the Zogoibys have descended from Sultan Muhammad who was called by his subjects El-zogoiby, the unfortunate, via a Jewish mistress who sailed for India pregnant with his child. This story is specifically though not unequivocally singled out as an invention by Moraes in his function as narrator.

Though, *The Moor's Last Sigh* covers much the same history as *Midnight's Children*, it lacks the sense of celebratory hope associated with India's and Saleem's early years. *The Moor's Last Sigh* depicts the faded and tattered flag of the secular, heterogeneous India.

A national impulse is always a part of a larger politics that transcends nationalism. History is the 'ultimate horizon' of literary and cultural analysis. Thus politics is just one of the interpretive methods that a writer uses in his creative representations of history.

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